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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: PRO-SYRIAN MARONITE PERCEIVES SUNNI THREAT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Former Minister of Interior Suleiman Franjieh believes the greatest threat facing Lebanon is the concentration of power in the hands of Saad Hariri's Sunni majority. He maintains that both Christian and Shia communities fear marginalization as Hariri's political bloc dominates the political process, with a bankroll supplied by Saudi Arabia. In Franjieh's opinion, this fear is blocking progress on other issues, such as the presidency, Hizballah's arms, relations with Syria, and critical political appointments. Franjieh supports Michel Aoun to succeed Emile Lahoud, but is convinced that if Aoun assumed the presidency, he would open up a number of corruption files which would inevitably tar many of Lebanon's leading political figures. In his view, this action would throw the country's political system into turmoil. For this reason, Franjieh believes Saad Hariri will prevent Aoun's candidacy, which in turn will most likely result in Emile Lahoud serving out his term. He reasoned that Syria's Bashar Asad could instruct Lahoud to leave, but will not do so unless Saudi Arabia publicly makes the request. End summary.

¶2. (C) Former Minister of Interior Suleiman Franjieh met with the Ambassador and poloff on March 27 in his home village of Zgharta east of Tripoli. Franjieh's pro-Syrian sympathies come from his close relationship with the Asad family. In 1978, the Lebanese Forces militia of Samir Ja'ja' killed his parents and younger sister in a reprisal raid on Zgharta. Franjieh's grandfather brought the eight year old Suleiman to Syria, where he was taken under the wing of Bashar's older brother Bassil. His friendship with the Asad family has remained close for nearly 30 years. It is assumed he communicates with them often and his observations regarding their motivations would be fairly accurate. Although currently out of office, his political support in the Christian Zgharta region remains strong.

SUNNI'S MONOPOLY ON POWER...

¶3. (C) It is clear that Franjieh does not trust Saad Hariri nor his Saudi benefactors. He believes the Sunnis in Lebanon are not benign democrats, but are intent on implementing a long term dominance over the country's political and economic affairs. The former minister believes the Saudi royal family has regional designs, including replacing the Asad regime with a Sunni dominated government.

¶4. (C) This perceived effort by Saad Hariri and his Sunni followers to establish hegemony in Lebanon has convinced Franjieh that both the Christian and Shia communities are

being forced to the sidelines. He argued that many of the difficult problems facing Lebanon are not being resolved principally because the Christians and Shia are pushing back.

15. (C) To illustrate, he expounded that the stalemate concerning the Lahoud presidency is not due to any deep allegiance to Emile Lahoud, but is rather an effort to deny Saad Hariri from dictating his choice to the Christian community. Franjieh said he would support Michel Aoun without question, because he was clearly the elected choice of the Christians. But Franjieh insisted that Saad Hariri was committed to preventing an Aoun presidency, partly due to personal animosity, but mostly because Aoun could not be trusted to not rock the boat in terms of investigating the complex web of corrupt practices which allegedly involve a large number of prominent politicians. He commented that even though he supports the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, in reality, he believes an Aoun presidency -- which would presumably feature a no-holds-barred drive against corruption -- would lead to increased turmoil.

16. (C) His second example of the corrosive influence of Saad Hariri's unchecked power involves the Shia community, specifically Hizballah's obsessive attachment to its arms. Franjieh implicitly acknowledged the organization really no longer had a need to maintain its militia and that Sheba Farms provided a convenient pretext. Rather he argued, the Shia were fearful of renewed Sunni dominance over their historically oppressed community. Of course, he said he understood their concern over the possibility of hostilities with Israel, but Franjieh insisted the Shia's real historical adversary was the Sunnis and their political and economic dominance.

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17. (C) Franjieh, who enjoys close relations with almost anyone opposed to Hariri's Future Movement, said he discussed these matters with Hassan Nasrallah soon after the Hizballah leader met with Saad Hariri three weeks ago. He believes the Christian and Sunni communities have to give Hizballah confidence that giving up its arms will not mean a return to a second-class citizenship. For this reason, he supported Michel Aoun's "cooperative alliance" with Hizballah as formalized by their February 6 communique.

...RESULTS IN POLITICAL STALEMATE

18. (C) In Franjieh's analysis, as long as Saad Hariri and his Saudi backers seek unchallenged control, the political process in Lebanon is likely to be laborious and inconclusive. He maintained that until Saad Hariri understands that dominance by any one community in Lebanon will result in effective blockage of all progress, the country will merely stumble forward.

19. (C) He remarked that he visits Emile Lahoud every month and is convinced the president is intent on staying until the last day of his (extended) term -- unless he is told to go by the Syrians. Concerning that possibility, Franjieh said that only if Saudi Arabia (or presumably Egypt) publicly requests Syria to resolve the presidency issue will it be solved -- and then only with a genuine (i.e. non-Hariri) Maronite candidate. In Franjieh's opinion, even the issues of the Syrian/Lebanese border and exchange of diplomatic relations could be resolved if the Saudis would recognize Syria as a country of regional influence.

COMMENT

10. (C) When one speaks with Suleiman Franjieh, one receives an unvarnished view of still-powerful Syrian influence in Lebanon. Franjieh's loyalties are out in the open and although he reflects a minority view, his contention

that Saad Hariri and his Sunni colleagues have acquired too much power in Lebanon's finely balanced society resonates with more than an insignificant proportion of Christians and Shia. His illustration of Hizballah holding onto its arms to fend off Sunni dominance is a stretch, but his example of Christian fear of Hariri manipulating the next president is widely held. Once again, the Lebanese penchant for putting anything and everything in sectarian terms is evident, even when speaking with a political outrider like Franjieh. End comment.

FELTMAN